

Being more creative

Cartoon of Rodin's 'The Thinker' – bubble from his mouth says: 'Now where did I put my clothes?'

A good deal of the approach to decision making and problem solving in this unit has revolved around the more systematic or logical approaches – step by step if you like. But sometimes you may need to solve a problem which requires a more creative approach. For example, developing a new product or service, saving energy, improving motivation, cutting costs. The mind likes thinking in blocks though so creative thinking is harder than 'normal' thinking.

Think about this case study.

Lottie Loot was having trouble with one of her products in her DIY business. The DIY garden sheds were being returned 50% of the time due to poor fit between some of the metal brackets and the wood components. Being a bit of a problem solver, Lottie decided to create a Fishbone Diagram of the problem. So she listed all the possible things that might be causing the problem. She defined three categories – materials, people, processes. Under 'materials', she wrote badly designed wood and metal components, wood warping, metal bending; under 'people', she wrote poor workmanship, delivery people careless, customers careless; under 'processes', she wrote poor manufacturing practices, bad packaging, poor storage. She then went off to her stakeholders such as the manufacturers and distributors to check with them. The manufacturers said there was nothing wrong with the design specification or the manufacturing process. All components were present and correct. They also stored items according to quality requirements, so there was no chance of wood warping in storage. The distributors said they packed and delivered according to their service level agreement and could guarantee there was no damage in transit. Her own employees also insisted the components were undamaged on reception and on sale. Perhaps she should ask those other stakeholders – her customers. This led to the solution, but it wasn't through asking one who returned the garden shed that she found the answer. It was through someone who didn't because they had solved the problem, which had nothing to do with anything she'd written down on her Fishbone Diagram. It was to do with materials and people and a process but one she hadn't thought of.

Now do this

What could have been the cause of the problem?

What do you always get with DIY goods? Instructions! The instructions were wrong, the wrong brackets were going in the wrong places. Easy to work out maybe for the experienced DIY person, but not for the rest. The instructional materials, process and designers were the cause of the problem.

Although this seems a perfectly simple and logical solution, Lottie wasn't thinking 'out of the box'. She was obsessed with things that weren't fitting, instead of taking one jump back and thinking about things that described how things fitted together.

Bright idea! (second time round)

When you can't work it out yourself, get others to do it for you.

Barriers to creative thinking

Creative thinking isn't easy and does require a leap in the way you normally think. People often create their own barriers to creative thinking by thinking 'it's only for creative people, like artists and poets, not me', which isn't true. You can improve at it. Work barriers exist as well as creativity is not encouraged in many workplaces – you have to just 'get the job done'. Nor is it easy to be creative in the rough and tumble and stress of the normal managerial routine.

No one can think clearly when his fists are clenched.

George Hean Nathan

People with systematic ways of thinking too may have attitudes and opinions and mind-sets which make creative thinking difficult.

Now do this

Note down any barriers to creative thinking you may have.

Bright idea!

Knowing these barriers exist is half-way to removing them.

The creative-thinking process

Knowing how the creative-thinking process works can help you to be more creative. John Adair in *Decision Making and Problem Solving* provides the following explanation of the creative-thinking process.

Preparation

The hard work. You have to collect and sort the relevant information, analyse the problem as thoroughly as you can, and explore possible solutions.

Incubation

This is the depth-mind phase. Mental work – analysing, synthesising and imagining, and valuing – continues on the problem in your subconscious mind. The parts of the problem separate and new combinations occur. These may involve other ingredients stored away in your memory.

Insight

The 'Eureka' moment. A new idea emerges into your conscious mind, either gradually or suddenly, like a fish flashing out of the water. These moments often occur when you are not thinking about the problem but are in a relaxed frame of mind.

Validation

This is where your valuing faculty comes into play. A new idea, insight, intuition, hunch, or solution needs to be thoroughly tested. This is especially so if it is to form the basis for action of any kind.

Adair J, *Decision Making and Problem Solving*, CIPD, 1997, p55

Note how this process, according to Adair, is quite systematic really – particularly the first and last parts.

More creative-thinking techniques

To get better at creative thinking, use more creative-thinking techniques. We've already met some in section 2 such as brainstorming and lateral thinking. Here are a few more.

Six Thinking Hats

The Six Thinking Hats creative-thinking technique was developed by Edward de Bono based on the idea that there are six distinct categories of thinking – such as being analytical, creative or judgmental – and that thinking is most constructive if group members are able to focus all thinking energies on one category of thinking at a time. It's not a lateral thinking technique.

The six categories of thinking are each represented by a metaphorical coloured hat. In a group the technique depends on everyone playing the game. Participants agree that when they all mentally put on a particular coloured hat, they will all use that colour's category of thinking. This encourages people to think in parallel, rather than in a confrontational way.

The white hat	Facts and information known or needed
The black hat	Logical, judgmental and cautious – why an idea or a proposal may not work
The yellow hat	Positive, optimistic and logical – why an idea will work and the benefits it brings
The red hat	Feelings, emotions, intuitions – without having to justify them
The green hat	Creativity, possibilities, options, new ideas
The blue hat	Controls the whole thinking process

Cartoon of six people round a table with six coloured hats on

The blue hat (chairperson) controls and gives a direction to the discussion. 'That's good white hat thinking. Let's do some green hat thinking for a while'.

You can use this technique for making your mind up about possible solutions to problems.

Analogy

This is a lateral thinking technique where you make a metaphorical comparison between a problem and something else to generate ideas. You could use it to better understand the nature of a problem or generate solutions.

'Choosing the right candidate for this job is like looking for elephants in England. Now what do these two activities have in common? Well, elephants do exist in England, but only in special places. What special places may our candidate reside? Outside our skills area, but maybe in London. Point 1 – widen our advertising net. Elephants live in zoos where they get special treatment, otherwise they don't adapt too well. Point 2 – are we offering enough for this job? The English climate is not ideal for elephants. What's the climate like in this organisation? Point 3 (bit wild this one) – do we need a cultural shake-up? Elephants are looked after by professionals. Point 4 – let's find out more about potential candidates from recruitment agencies, or what about the Net? If you go hunting for elephants, you need an elephant gun. If you went around with an elephant gun in England, you'd look a right idiot. Are we being subtle enough in our approach? Point 5 – let me look at that person specification again. There are different types of elephants – African and Indian. Now, are we appealing to all types of ethnic communities in our literature? Point 6 – examine literature from equal opportunities point of view. Elephants can also be found in circuses. That's a specialist situation. Point 7 – advertise in specialist press...'

Now do this

Think about one problem you have and apply an analogy to it. Come up with some points about your problem and potential solutions.

Bright idea!

Don't hire an elephant to a human's job.